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ABSTRACT

The importance of Native languages to Native Americans and the effort needed to maintain them are discussed in this keynote address at the ninth Native American Language Issues Institute. It is noted that the current cultural transition has demeaned Native languages and cultures and that strategies must be devised by Native Americans to counter the negative effects of cultural transition. Complications include alien organizational systems, high technology, alcohol and drugs, ambiguous values, exploding populations, erosion of language and culture, and a shrinking world that affects the remotest villages and reservations. Rather than rejecting the white man's education, Native Americans should manipulate it and give it a Native cultural input and relevance. Effective practices can help reduce the high dropout rate. Practices include the following: returning to learning and teaching language and culture within the family; encouraging parents to support the schools; identifying the best approaches for learning both native languages and English; increasing the involvement of Native Americans as teachers, administrators, and members of school boards; sustaining generations-long tribal-wise efforts; encouraging leaders with a wider vision; supporting bilingual education as an option and multicultural courses as requirements for teachers; and insisting on cultural relevance for school systems serving a majority of language minority students. The necessity of becoming involved in the political process is also noted. It is concluded that Native languages nurture spirits and hearts while the English language is the means for physical sustenance. (LB)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival

Dick Littlebear

It is difficult for our Native American languages and cultures to survive and it will get more difficult. One of the reasons for this increasing difficulty for Native language groups is that we are in the midst of a cultural transition which has demeaned our languages and cultures. However, remember that our cultures have proven their ability to survive and adapt over the past thousands of years when they have undergone other cultural transitions. Let us not allow this present cultural transition to be any different. The problem is that others have defined for us how to cope with this transition and their efforts have only minimally succeeded.

This means we must devise our own strategies to counter the negative effects of cultural transition. Especially since this cultural transition is being complicated by alien organizational systems, by high technology, by alcohol, by drugs, by ambiguous values, by exploding populations, by erosion of language and culture, and by a shrinking world which brings new demands that impact daily the remotest villages and reservations. Because of these complications, this transition is forcing us to realign our cultures to fit the present educational, economic, political, and social circumstances in which we native minority language people find ourselves. However, I believe we can use the white man's education, as we Cheyennes refer to it, to our advantage.

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By manipulating the white man's education we can shape our cultures to our liking to fit our needs. After all, it is the white man's education and the way it was perpetrated on us that we have objected to; we have never objected to learning itself. Manipulating the white man's education is a challenge. Let's not be discouraged. But above all, let us not say we do not want the white man's education. Though it was imposed on us insensitively, let's make it our own by giving it our own unique cultural input and making it relevant to our situations. Our languages and cultures will have a better chance of surviving if we have the same academic knowledge as the dominant society.

I am optimistic that we can do this with a more manipulative attitude toward the white man's education so that we can have the final word in what shape our cultures assume. Developing this attitude has not been and will not be easy. Getting educated in the white man's way has been difficult, especially for Native Americans, for a variety of reasons. One of them is the lack of positive acknowledgement of our cultures and languages.

Native American students have the highest dropout rates when measured by any criteria. These dropout rates are rapidly becoming a Native American academic tradition. It is a tradition that is being forced on us; it is a tradition with no cultural basis. What causes this dropout rate? In Alaska about sixty percent of urban Alaskan natives drop out of high school, partly because of the stress of changing social and cultural factors (Native, 1989). One of the elements of this "stress of changing social and cultural factors" is the cultural transition I have referred to.

Because this stress is present, I speculate that something definitely is wrong with the way we are being educated. What is wrong is that we language minority Americans have seldom been asked to participate positively in the education of our own children. This brings us back to our conference theme, *Effective Language Education Practices and Native Language Survival*. It contains two ideas, effective practices and language survival, which, when acted upon positively, can help lower the dropout rates of our native language

minority students, increase their achievement levels, enhance individual and cultural self-esteem, and aid in the acquisition of English.

Willig (1985) in her research on bilingual education found that students who participated in bilingual programs consistently got higher English language test scores in reading, language skills, mathematics and total achievement. It is clear that educational methods incorporating the cultural and linguistic knowledge of students are the most effective methods for preparing them to compete in the mainstream of society.

What are effective language education practices? The most effective are those which have been in use for thousands of years; those done by the family. If we are serious about preserving our languages and cultures, we must start using our languages daily and everywhere. We must talk to our children in our own languages and share with them the positive sides of our past and contemporary cultures.

If they are to survive, we must return the learning and teaching of our languages and our cultures to where they rightfully belong -- in the families. The parents and elders represent the most effective language learning and teaching practices that we can utilize to ensure the survival of our languages and cultures. We must re-instill the value of our languages and cultures in the family unit and not just hope the schools will do it for us.

Schools have limited resources and opportunities to do what the family and the tribe can and must do; after all, they have done it for thousands of years. For instance, a Title VII Bilingual Grant, with its funding based on three year increments, cannot turn back the language loss that has been going on for hundreds of years and which has intensified during this century. Schools can only reinforce the language and cultural learning that goes on at home.

However, if we are going to turn over to the schools our responsibilities for teaching our languages and cultures then we must help the schools in a positive way. We must help identify the most effective language practices. Parents must encourage and support the schools in their efforts. That is the

price for abdicating a role that has belonged to families for thousands of years.

We have to identify and learn to use effective language practices so that we can learn both our native languages and English. Admittedly learning native languages and English are difficult demands. They are made even more difficult if we do not know how to speak our own languages, if we do not teach our children how to speak our own native languages, if we speak only survival level English, and if we do not know how our languages work linguistically. We must also be able to apply all of this learning in the classrooms and in our homes.

What we need are more native teachers, administrators, and better informed school boards whose agendas are education and students. We must encourage our native people to become linguists. We must look to the examples of the Maoris of New Zealand and their preschool language nests. We must look to using strategies like the summer language camps on the Rocky Boy's and Wind River reservations. We must look to using methods such as Total Physical Response and High Intensive Language Training teaching techniques as is being done on the Blackfeet and Flathead reservations or use the Japanese models for after school and weekend language classes.

We must prepare ourselves to sustain generations-long, tribal-wide efforts if we hope to restore our languages and maintain them at conversational usage levels, presuming that is what we want to do. We must capture and apply the knowledge about our languages and cultures so that they can survive the onslaughts of today's media, schools, religions, and misguided tirades from the "English-only" movement.

Furthermore, the graduates of the year 2000 are already in the first grade this year and they will be college graduates in 2004. If we are to educate our future leaders of the 21st Century to value our languages and cultures, we must start educating them now about our languages and cultures. If we want our students to reap the advantages of the dominant society while still retaining our cherished cultural values, we must start educating them now about these values.

We are going to need leaders with a vision that includes our languages and cultures, leaders who can articulate that vision to our people, leaders who can transform that vision to our people, leaders who can transfer that vision into constructive action for the greater educational, economic, political, and social advantage for our people. More concisely, we are going to need leaders who match and exceed the time-tested qualities of past leaders of our tribes and villages.

We can get leaders with those qualities through an appropriate education since native minority language people are just as eager to have their children succeed as any middle class family, but they have seldom had much say in how success comes about. It is time we were listened to when it comes to educating our own children. It is time the dominant society lets us help educate our children aš we have done over the past thousands of years.

Let us make, for instance, bilingual education an option or an endorsement or at least an emphasis in the teacher education programs everywhere. This will partially acknowledge the profound fact that for many of the students in this country that there are other powerful, dynamic cultures still contributing to the development of minority language children.

It is time that multicultural courses be required of all college graduates and especially for those who are aspiring to be teachers. It is time that state education standards are made flexible so that we can use native minority language and cultural expertise without having to abide by state standards which seek to exclude this native expertise, which have minimally met our needs, which have failed to acknowledge in actual practice the existence of our cultures and languages, which have not increased our achievement levels or our graduation rates, and which have done little or nothing to eliminate the burgeoning dropout rates except to imply that we fail because we are language minority people -- a curious twist on blaming the victim.

It is time to insist on cultural relevance for those school systems which serve a majority of language minority students.

I believe that including our languages and cultures on a positive basis in the school systems is one part of the answer.

I am not asking that standards be lowered merely to accommodate minority language people. I am sure that the same degree of rigor now in place could be applied to these flexible standards if they were ever to become realities. I am also sure that minority language people could meet and better any standards as long as they saw the relevance these standards have to their unique situations. I am saying that these flexible standards should be made relevant to local situations especially where there are language minority students involved.

All the forgoing would probably mean a wholesale revamping of state and provincial educational standards so that they are relevant to schools on an individual basis. This probably means that revamping will never occur. However, it would seem that countries should be able to devise flexible education standards. It would mean more involvement of Native people in state, provincial, and national political processes. That would mean an investment of personal time, but the return would be great since we could then help determine political agendas and representation.

If we are going to constructively deal with the misguided rhetoric of the ethnocentric "English-only" movement in this country, then native minority language people are just going to have to get involved in state and national politics so injustices are not perpetuated. Let's not use what I refer to as "cultural trauma" as an excuse to relinquish our citizenship rights in our state, province, or nation or our concern for appropriate educational systems.

For too long what happened to our people in the past centuries and what continues to happen today has left our cultures traumatized. Granted what happened to us in the last century was horrible. I do not want to minimize that. However, many of us tend to use those historical events to blame the dominant culture for everything that happens to us, even if those events are of our own making. I think we should use those past events as object lessons, learn from them and move on. Other contemporary cultures have experienced similar

horrible treatment and have learned from it and moved on. So let us shake off the paralyzing effects of the cultural trauma of the previous century and not perpetuate its effects. I believe we can do that. A culture's longevity is measured by its adaptability and by how much it can absorb and utilize positive aspects of alien cultures. I believe most fervently that our native cultures have these characteristics.

The white man's education is definitely one of these positive aspects when it is made relevant to our own situations as language minority people. I personally see no conflict in getting educated because I believe that it is the Cheyenne way to self-actualize, to be the best Cheyenne I can possibly be with what *Ma'heo'o* has granted me. I further believe that our chiefs from the past would have wanted us to get educated because they would have seen in an appropriate education the means of language and cultural survival. I have deep respect for our native ceremonies, our languages, and our cultures because they have meaningful and enduring qualities from which we can learn. They have had these qualities for thousands of years. I believe these qualities are what has been missing from the white man's educational systems. For that reason we should seek to perpetuate our cultures and languages.

It is time that we look to our own histories, not as they were taught to us in school, but as we know them through the stories of our parents and grandparents and there find the inspiration to take charge of our educational, economic, political, and social destinies. Our histories teem with appropriate examples.

For instance, in Cheyenne history there is an account of the tribe encountering a marshy area. Curious as to what was on the other side of the marsh, the tribe sent a group to explore. When they came back they told of flat dry land on the other side. They marked the way by sticking poles in the water. By following these poles the Cheyennes were able to cross the marsh and begin their transition to becoming a tribe of the Great Plains. By using the poles, the Cheyenne found a better place to live (Weist, 1977).

I see in this account a parallel for education among our own native people. Symbolically, the poles could represent appropriate education to show us the way to better our lives and the lives of those who are going to follow us.

For all my talk of native languages, we must also learn the English language because it provides access to the dominant culture. If we do not have access we will not be able to determine our own educational, economic, political, and social agendas. For this reason, I see our native languages nurturing our spirits and hearts and the English language as sustenance for our bodies.

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